

Church Music and Atheistic Ideology in the Last Decade of the USSR

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Authoritarian societies that follow certain rules in the religious, cultural, and political realms tend to be little tolerant of other views and practices. There is a very revealing research niche for the study of “otherness” in the regulated fields of human activity. Yet, a niche within a niche is a study of historical or, in any case, former practices that come back to life after a gap of many decades. This is the case with church music of the last decade of Soviet history that has returned to artistic practice after a sixty-year ban. The article examines the socio-cultural circumstances that accompanied the creation of a number of works in various church genres written by professional Soviet composers, supported by a brief description of these works. Information about atheistic ideology, cultural doctrine, music management, and church life in the USSR completes the range of topics discussed.

Keywords: church music, church life, atheistic ideology, USSR, Soviet composers, music management, cultural doctrine

Introduction

While in the former USSR (that is, the Soviet Union), religion, if not prohibited, was clearly oppressed and no development of church music was observed for years, then in the 1980s, the very last decade of Soviet history, the authorities gradually ceased banning the composition of sacred music. Yet, there were no rules for writing church music in a country that adhered to an atheistic ideology for decades, so Soviet composers who wanted to work with Christian texts had to choose between traditional and modern musical styles, based only on personal aesthetic preferences. This essay examines several religious works written by G. Sviridov, A. Schnittke, A. Pärt, and S. Gubaidulina, preceded by a historical and socio-cultural background. Being a brief summary, emphasizing rather the general typological approach to the subject, this material can serve as a representation of the topic that suggests further research.

Unlike the previous six centuries or so, the 20th century was not particularly favorable for composers who wanted to write church music. As Rosenblatt (2019) argues,

[b]y the end of the nineteenth century, liturgical music in the Western church had already seriously influenced the duration of church service, sometimes turning liturgical worship into a kind of concert in which there was no room for a spoken (not a sung) word. (Rosenblatt, 2019, p. 76)

When the Vatican became aware of this problem, Pope Pius X issued an instruction on November 22, 1903 clearly stating that “the more closely a composition for church approaches in its movement, inspiration and savor

the Gregorian form, the more sacred and liturgical it becomes.”¹ The implication of this gesture was that the Catholic Church no longer encouraged composers to write new compositions of liturgical content if they were not based on medieval (or reminiscent of medieval) melodies. 10 years later, the situation already seemed as if “the essence of high Mass is not the music but the deacon and subdeacon” (Fortesque, 1913, p. 799). In other words, in the early 20th century, the Catholic Church became so critical of music that it was ready to give it up rather than let music determine the ceremony. As a result, the rich volume of Christian music of the 17th to 19th centuries gradually moved to the concert halls, and was performed by secular singers, choirs, and musicians.

On the other hand, the connection between living composers and church musical practices (mainly in the Protestant and Anglican/Episcopal churches) continued in search of the proper path. The language of musical modernism could not have been appropriate. As Clarke notes, “twentieth-century ‘art-music’ idioms are not generally understood or liked in church congregations. It is doubtful that congregations would ever try to sing atonal hymn tunes” (Clarke, 1987, p. 153). Yet, as noted in the introduction to a hymnal of the late 1930s: “[e]ach generation, with its problems and outlook, must ever seek ways of expressing its ideas and aspirations.” (Church of England in Canada, 1938, p. iii). The preface to a later collection of hymns is even more specific: “Young people especially wish to sing hymns cast in the style of the twentieth century.” (Anglican Church of Canada, 1971, p. iv). This clearly refers to the pop-rock music of that period. As Rosenblatt (2018) makes clear,

[f]or various reasons, the missionary work, and then the post-missionary reconfiguration of churches and local parishes—all this spiritual, educational and organizational enterprise was possible only thanks to the ecumenical position of missionaries and local clergy. In the same way, the non-dogmatic character of the hymn allowed the joint committees to abstain from doctrinal or theological differences between churches and to produce hymnbooks, shared by several denominations and therefore perceived as rather national collections of church music. (Rosenblatt, 2018, p. 25)

All this has little to do with the church music practices of 20th-century Russia. Historically, Maxim Berezovsky (1745-1777) and Dmitry Bortniansky (1751-1825) first introduced the Western musical style of the Classical period into Russian sacred music in the late 18th century in unaccompanied choral works of paraliturgical content (Ritzarev, 2006, Chapters 6, 8, 13, 14). However, these did not become part of public Orthodox worship. Unlike the Western Church, where “art music” with spiritual content had always been part of the ministry, the Russian church authorities never recognized Western-style church music, especially instrumental music. The October Revolution in Russia (1917) led to a split among national composers, dividing them into those who remained in their homeland and those who emigrated to the West. The creativity of the latter group includes individual works associated with sacred-related themes, such as Rachmaninoff’s *Vespers and Bells*, Stravinsky’s *Symphony of Psalms*, or several works by Alexander Grechaninov (1864-1956), written in both Orthodox and Western styles. At the same time, over the entire 70-year history of the USSR, church music was never associated with the work of Soviet composers. As is commonly known, religions and their institutions were relegated there, and the development of church ritual and music was not observed.

The questions we will try to answer can be formulated as follows: did sacred music written by professional composers exist in the USSR, and, if so, what was its character, features, and did it belong to a certain tradition? To answer these questions, we first provide the concise information about atheistic ideology, church life, music management, and cultural doctrine in the USSR.

¹ *Tra Le Sollecitudini*, Instruction on Sacred Music by Pope Pius X, 22 November 1903, accessed January 22, 2019, <https://adoremus.org/1903/11/22/tra-le-sollecitudini>.

Atheistic Ideology and Church Life in the USSR

Over the more than 70-year history of the Soviet Union, there have been periods when the Soviet authorities persecuted religions, including Christianity, to various degrees, depending on state interests. The Soviet leadership consistently advocated control, suppression and, ultimately, the eradication of religious beliefs, actively encouraging the spread of Marxist-Leninist atheism in the USSR. Although most religions have never officially been banned, the state advocated the elimination of religion and, to achieve this goal, it officially declared religious beliefs to be superstitious and backward. Many churches, synagogues, and mosques were destroyed or turned into museums of atheism (a striking example of which, until recently, was the Kazan Cathedral of St. Petersburg). While some religious leaders, devoted to the regime, continued to minister and to represent religious “tolerance” of the regime, many others were mocked, persecuted, imprisoned, and executed. The Communist Party flooded schools and the media with an anti-religious system of beliefs called “scientific atheism”, with its own rituals and commitments. However, religious beliefs and customs continued among the majority of the population in the domestic and private spheres, as well as in those public places that the state allowed to exist, thus admitting its inability to eradicate religion (Froese, 2004).

In fact, the Soviet regime never officially outlawed religious beliefs. Moreover, various Soviet constitutions have always guaranteed the right to believe. Being rather a hypocrisy, this greatly helped the state to use the church during the war to encourage patriotism. However, since the Marxist ideology, as interpreted by Lenin and his successors, viewed religion as an obstacle to building a Communist society, the consistent destruction of all religions (and their replacement by atheism) became a fundamentally important ideological goal of the Soviet state. Lenin’s “Decree on Separation of Church and State”, issued on January 23, 1918, determined the conditions for the relationship between the state, church, and education system. The decree was in effect until 1990, when it was replaced by the new Law of the Russian Federation “On Freedom of Religion”. The decree was of historical importance for the implementation of the idea of equality between various groups of the population of the young Soviet republic by preventing discrimination on religious grounds. On the other hand, it handed over almost unlimited rule and legislation into the hands of the Communist regime. Religion, its institutions, and employees were the first victims of this situation. For seven decades, depending on state needs, various tactics were used to suppress, persecute, diminish, and sometimes allow (under control) the participation of the Russian Orthodox Church in Soviet life. However, after Stalin’s death, only a few documents relating to the published resolutions of the Central Committee (of CPSU) give us an idea of how religion was treated at that time (Anderson, 1994, p. 3).

Soviet leaders after Stalin were not consistent in their attitude toward the Orthodox Church. In general, they refrained from the tactics of direct repression, although they did try to introduce the internal security services (KGB) into the ranks of the clergy. Only in the late 1980s, under the leadership of M. Gorbachev, did new political and social freedoms lead to the return of most of the church buildings to the Church. This marked a new approach to religion on the part of the state, which decided that the best thing it could do was simply to minimize the “harmful effects” of religion (Pospelovsky, 1987, p. 121).

During the Soviet period, church life was not completely eliminated in villages and small, even large cities of the USSR. One or two churches have always been active and served their small congregations. In large cities, the majority of the parishioners were old people who once came from the countryside to the city to work, and who either stayed there or moved to live with their children at an advanced age. Such persons were allowed to

come to church without restrictions.² At the same time, anyone with social status, other than a housekeeper or a pensioner, could not even think about attending church, because public consciousness had developed a norm for treating religion over the decades as something connected with the past or with backward views. Moreover, if you were noticed attending church, this could directly lead to expulsion from the Komsomol,³ not to mention the Communist Party, which, in turn, meant that you lost your career. However, in small towns, church attendance, even by school teachers, was not punishable—although it was not recommended.

Music Management and Soviet Cultural Doctrine

Soon after the October Revolution 1917, Russian artists, writers, and musicians were faced with the need to develop a personal and artistic position in relation to the new Soviet ideology. For many, this was not an issue, given the long tradition of “critical realism” and “revolutionary spirit” that characterized Russian art and music (for example, Scriabin) in previous decades. However, it was music that played an important role in Communist ideological propaganda: the mass song became one of the main genres associated with Soviet music, at least from the 1930s to the 1950s. This point requires further clarification. Not only were the majority of Soviet mass songs written by composers of Jewish origin (Ritzarev, 2012, p. 37), for whom Christian themes were insufficiently familiar and were not included in the creative agenda, the topic of composing music related to religious service was not on the general agenda of the state. The authorities interfered more and more in the composers’ work, including the choice of genres and musical language.

Until the mid-1930s, however, the pioneering atmosphere of Soviet music and theater was still daring. Young Shostakovich experimented with atonality and ironized in the genres of opera and ballet, collaborating with such prominent personalities as the poet V. Mayakovsky and theatrical director V. Meyerhold. Prokofiev, who lived in the West from the 1920s to the mid-1930s and was tired of competing with Rachmaninov and Stravinsky in the category of “contemporary Russian composer”, was considering a return to his homeland. This was on the cards up until January 1936, when Stalin attended a performance of Shostakovich’s opera *Lady Macbeth of the Mtsensk District*. The next day, Pravda, the central organ of the Soviet press, published an unsigned editorial “Sumbur vmesto muzyki” (“Muddle Instead of Music”), which was the first blow to be publicly delivered to a Soviet musician by Stalin’s criticism. The article prompted Shostakovich to remove his new Fourth Symphony from rehearsals, and to think about changing his musical language. Many of composer’s acquaintances, with whom he worked or merely talked, disappeared into the dungeons of the Stalinist secret police (NKVD). The composer’s son Maxim Shostakovich claims that once, after visiting the Soviet military leader M. Tukhachevsky, who favored the young composer and tried to promote him as best as he could, Shostakovich was summoned to the Leningrad department of the NKVD and asked to remember if Tukhachevsky had discussed the plan for Stalin’s assassination with the guests. Shostakovich denied any such knowledge, and was summoned the following day to continue the interrogation. He was miraculously saved by the fact that the investigator himself was arrested the following morning (Ardov, 2003, p. 59). Tukhachevsky and Meyerhold were executed in 1937 and 1940, respectively.

² This follows from childhood memories of the author who grew up in Soviet Russia in the 1960s: The housekeeper in his family was an Orthodox Christian who regularly went to church either with a housekeeper from the family of another Jewish professor or with a retired neighbor.

³ Contraction for *Kommunisticheskiy Soyuz Molodyozhi* [Young Communist League], the youth division of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union. The organization was disbanded in 1991.

The second wave of Stalin's criticism of writers and composers came in 1948, when the Decree of the Central Committee of the CPSU "On the Opera The Great Friendship by Vano Muradeli" was issued, in which the leading Soviet composers Shostakovich and Prokofiev were declared "formalists". Shostakovich, who proved to be very productive during the World War II years and, it would seem, regained the favor of the authorities and gradually returned to the elements of the musical language characteristic of his early style, pretended to accept criticism and was forced to speak out publicly in order to survive:

No matter how hard it is for me to hear the condemnation of my music, and even more so the condemnation of it by the Central Committee, I know that the party is right, that the party wishes me good and that I have to look for and find concrete creative ways that would lead me to Soviet realistic art. I understand that this is not an easy path for me, that it's not so easy for me to start writing in a new way. [...] But I can't help but look for these new ways, because I am a Soviet artist, I was brought up in a Soviet country, I have to seek and want to find a way to the heart of the people.⁴ (Union of Soviet Composers, 1948, p. 343)

Soon after the publication of the Decree, Shostakovich was fired from the Leningrad and Moscow Conservatories.

The Soviet cultural doctrine, according to which artists, writers, and composers had to adhere to the party line in their creative work, was developed by the ideologist Andrei Zhdanov, then secretary of the CPSU Central Committee. This policy was carried out directly from 1945 to 1948, up until Zhdanov's death, but its echoes were felt for another 10 years. The British philosopher Isaiah Berlin, who hosted Shostakovich during his time at Oxford in 1958, where the composer was awarded an honorary doctorate, later shared the impression the composer made on him in one of his personal letters: "[...] what an extraordinary effect censorship and prison has on creative genius. It limits it, but deepens it" (Berlin, 2011, p. 640).

Not only composers, but musicologists too were persecuted for their analysis of tonality in the works of disgraced composers, for scientific, and uncritical attitudes to Western, and in particular American music—either simply for their origin, or in the context of political repression against their parents. For example, music theorist A. Dolzhansky published an article on the modal foundations of Shostakovich's works of the 1940s. As Rosenblatt (2020) states,

[t]he article was first published in *Sovetskaya muzyka* 4 (1947). [...] In 1948, the musicologist was fired for his refusal to condemn Shostakovich, who was being heavily criticized at that time. Dolzhansky returned to Leningrad Conservatory in 1954, where he taught until he died in 1966. (Rosenblatt, 2020, p. 85, fn. 27)

Valentina Konen, one of the leading Soviet musicologists, a specialist in Western music, was the daughter of a Communist of Jewish origin from Baku, who emigrated with his family to the United States. 10 years later he returned with his family to the Soviet Union, and was then executed. Konen was persecuted by every possible means because of her origins in an "enemy of the people" family and her knowledge of American music. The renowned American musicologist Richard Taruskin recently shared the story of V. Konen, who was his mother's closest friend in New York for 10 years (Taruskin, 2019, pp. 22-23).

This whole atmosphere of enthusiasm, fear, praise, and repression meant that Soviet composers did not want to write music associated with church and religion, at least until the late 1970s. So, what happened next, in the last decade of the Soviet era?

⁴ Musicologist M. Sabinina recalls how Shostakovich later spoke about this speech on the basis of a piece of paper slipped to him: "I climbed out onto the podium, began to read aloud the nonsense concocted by someone. I read, humiliated myself—just like a clown, [...] like a cardboard doll on a string!" (Sabinina, 2003, p. 25).

Findings: Spiritual Works of Late Soviet Composers

Throughout the 1980s, Soviet authorities did not yet encourage, but no longer prohibited the composition of religious (liturgical, paraliturgical, or any other sacred) music. Since there was no guidance as to the writing of church music, the few composers who had the courage to pursue sacred texts had to choose between a traditional or an avant-garde approach to the subject, depending on personal aesthetic preferences and perception of the subject. The group associated with the first of the above approaches includes Georgy Sviridov (1915-98), Alfred Schnittke (1934-98), and Arvo Pärt (b. 1935). The second approach is primarily represented by Sofia Gubaidulina (b. 1931).

Below is an overview of several examples of sacred music by the aforementioned composers, preceded by biographical references to each of them and other useful information. Being rather a blueprint for possible future case studies, this section, however, sheds light on the uniqueness of personality and worldview of each of these composers.

Georgy Sviridov: *Chants and Prayers*

Georgy Sviridov (1915-98) was born in a small town in the Kursk province (Russian Empire), in the family of a postal worker and a teacher. His mother sang in local church choir, and the boy attended church as a child,⁵ which led to his future interest in vocal and choral music, and, in the last years of his life, church melodies. Being one of the most distinctive Russian composers of the 20th century, Sviridov created his own unique style, which combined the spirit of folk and instrumental melodies of his native land with the language of a professional composer, who studied with Dmitry Shostakovich.

In his mature years, Sviridov deliberately chose the path of songwriting, since, in his opinion, “the voice alone is the instrument given by God.”⁶ According to Kholopova, Sviridov “found himself in the deliberate simplification of the modern musical language. ... [T]he impulse for his music comes from the sonority of measured rhythms inherent in verses” (Kholopova, 1997, p. 134). Sviridov remained respected and appreciated among Soviet composers and listeners, held high posts in the Union of Composers of the USSR, although after the aforementioned 1948 Resolution on Muradeli’s Opera *The Great Friendship*, he was for some time surrounded by an information vacuum, because the main target of that resolution was his teacher—Shostakovich. Not being a dissident, avant-gardist, or in any other way annoying to the authorities (and therefore drawing scant attention on the part of the Western press during the Iron Curtain era), Sviridov remains little known to scholars and listeners in the West. The *Encyclopaedia Britannica* dedicated only 300 words to him, and only a handful of books in English make reference to the composer—and these references are made mainly for comparison with other Soviet composers.⁷

Sviridov, who began as a composer in the mid-1930s, devoted his entire life to finding a balance between the soundscape of the Russian hinterland and modern urban trends. While Shostakovich, who was 10 years older, is associated mainly with the 1930s and ’40s, Sviridov is perceived as a composer of the 1950s and ’60s, primarily through his instrumental suite *Time, Forward!*, a fragment of which for decades served as an introduction to the evening information program (*Time*) of the Central Television of the USSR. While Sviridov wrote in a style that largely followed the tonal patterns of his teacher during World War II, all his post-war

⁵ Sviridov’s biography on *24SMI* [in Russian], accessed October 3, 2020, <https://24smi.org/celebrity/3791-georgii-sviridov.html>.

⁶ Sviridov on *24SMI*.

⁷ See Elphick (2020, p. 180), who speaks, in particular, of the close relationship between M. Weinberg and G. Sviridov.

compositions gradually moved toward minimalism and a clear commitment to national roots. The later vocal cycles, *Petersburg Songs* and *Petersburg*, both set to the Blok's poems, while generally more complex in musical language than the earlier works, are nevertheless possessed with unmistakably recognizable features of the composer's palette: the bell-ringing effect in the piano part, natural (church) modes in the vocal part, and minimalism of harmonic means.

Chants and Prayers is an unaccompanied cycle for mixed choir dated 1990. Work on the cycle began in 1985 and continued until 1997, when the last author's edition was released and the final order of the parts was approved by the composer. This cycle, like no other work by Sviridov, directly corresponds to his childhood memories of the melodies that his mother used to sing in the church choir, and which the Communist regime failed to erase from the memory of this Russian composer. The performance of *Chants and Prayers* sometimes includes *The Bride*, a song from the *Petersburg* cycle, in which the bell-ringing of the piano and the verbal image of the Virgin joining the funeral procession complement the spiritual part of the story of the bride following the groom's coffin. The inclusion of a song to Blok's verses, accompanied by piano, gives the effect of a concert performance to the cycle, which is otherwise perceived purely as church music.

Alfred Schnittke: *Requiem*

Alfred Schnittke (1934-98) was one of the most notorious Soviet composers of the post-war period. He headed the list of Soviet avant-garde composers (A. Schnittke – S. Gubaidulina – E. Denisov), who were his associates. Schnittke was not ignored by Western critics, if only because he was constantly criticized by the Soviet cultural authorities. The Soviet composers who were his contemporaries held different attitudes toward Schnittke's work. Sviridov's view was wholly negative with regard to Schnittke's music, while Shostakovich spoke quite positively about him.

In general, Schnittke is a rather unique personality in the Russian-Soviet context. And to a large extent, the point here is that all his life the composer was engaged in the search for his own national, cultural, and then religious identity. Alfred Schnittke was born in Engels, the then capital of the Volga-German Autonomous Republic (part of Russian Federation in 1917-41). The father of the future composer was a German-born Jew, and the paternal grandparents were from Riga, which was then part of the Russian Empire. Soon after World War I, they left for Germany, and (having retained Russian citizenship) returned to Russia 10 years later—first to Moscow, and then to Engels. Schnittke's mother came from those German families who had moved to Russia during the reign of Catherine the Great (1762 to 1796). According to the composer, the ethnic issue was not on the agenda in the USSR until 1941, and religion had been abolished, so mixed-heritage families were quite common at that time.⁸

With the outbreak of war, the situation began to change. At the everyday level, anti-Semitism resumed, and at the state level, the expulsion of Germans from the city of Engels began. The composer's father, who had been born in Germany, managed to prove his Jewish descent, and the family remained in the city. Moreover, the father succeeded in entering the ranks of the Soviet Army, which was not at all easy for a person born in Germany. After the war, the family lived for two years in Vienna, where Alfred's father worked as a correspondent for a Soviet newspaper. Alfred Schnittke was then 12 years old. The time spent in Vienna determined the cultural and

⁸ Hereinafter, the biographical information and interpretation by the composer of certain events in his life is based on Ivashkin (1994), electronic edition, accessed December 4, 2020. http://yanko.lib.ru/books/music/shnitke_ivashkin_besedu.html#_Toc18304350.

musical priorities of the future composer, who adhered to the classical rather than romantic aesthetics of musical composition.

The return to the Soviet Union once again raised questions of identity that had receded during Schnittke's stay in Vienna: whether to consider himself a German or a Jew. At the age of 16, on receiving a passport, Alfred decided to register as a Jew⁹ because, according to him, he considered it shameful to cover up his Jewishness by registering as a German. From that time on, the issues of national identity and cultural affiliation remained with the composer until his last days. If in Russia he had perceived himself more as a German, then in Germany, to where he moved in the last years of his life, he felt differently: in the eyes of the Germans he already was a "Russian composer", which, obviously, was too general for a person whose self-perception based on the nuances of cultural identity. Following the death of his mother, questions of religious self-determination were added to the issues of cultural and national self-determination. This was reflected in the composer's work. Thus, in 1983, he wrote the *Fourth Symphony*, which was the embodiment of a grandiose plan that united religions. Schnittke used musical means to describe the principle of One God, incorporating the intonations of Orthodox, Catholic, Protestant, and Synagogue singing into the music. A year later, in 1984, he wrote *Three Sacred Hymns for Choir* (following Orthodox prayer). And yet, Schnittke's most conceptually and artistically consistent work relating to the sacred theme was the *Requiem*, written several years earlier.

Completed in 1975, *Requiem* written for soloists, mixed choir, and a very unconventional set of instruments: organ, piano, bass guitar, and percussion complies with the composer's advent to polystylism, in which features of different stylistic *periods* are bizarrely combined and mixed. Nevertheless, as recently noted, "this is authentic Christian music."¹⁰

The main impetus for writing the *Requiem* was the death of the composer's mother. At first, the composer's thoughts were directed toward writing instrumental funeral music that would complement his piano quintet. However, receiving a commission from one of the Moscow theaters to compose music for the "invisible mass for the dead", the composer chose in favor of the *Requiem*. The dark hues of the work, which created an atmosphere of anticipation of a catastrophe, coincided with Schnittke's personal mood and finally determined the concept of the composition.

According to the church canon, the mass for the dead is based on two cornerstone postulates—"eternal rest" (*Requiem aeternam*) and "eternal light" (*Lux perpetua*), endowing the human being with hope for salvation after the Last Judgment and at life after mortal life. The composer placed the semantic accents in an original manner, omitting stanzas (from the Introit) and entire movements (*Lux aeterna*, *Libera me*) dealing with the ideas of "eternal light." All with the more force the latter asserts itself, following the apocalyptic pictures of the section of "Dies irae" (The Day of Wrath), in the culmination section of the 13th movement, "Credo" (The Creed). As it is well known, according to the church canon, this text does not form a part of the service for the dead, but Schnittke felt it extremely important to assert the Christian postulate of the "faith in one God," in His Trinitarian essence, "in the Lord Jesus Christ, God from God, Light from Light..." (*Deum de Deo, lumen de lumine*). (Krivitskaya, 2014)

Being the first work of its kind composed in the USSR, Schnittke's *Requiem* became a landmark and a kind of forerunner of the sacred works written by Soviet composers in the following decade.

⁹ Since about the mid-1920s, the column "Nationality" appeared in Soviet passports (internal identity cards of citizens of the USSR), which mandatorily indicated the *ethnic* origin of a person. In the case of different ethnic origins of the parents, either of the two could be chosen. Once made, this choice could no longer be changed – A.R.

¹⁰ English annotation for the Program of concert held on 6 November 2019 in Moscow, at De Boni Arte Charitable Foundation, accessed December 4, 2020, <https://artbene.ru/en/concert/06-11-2019/>.

Sofia Gubaidulina: *St. John Passion*

Composers like Gubaidulina provoke mutually exclusive comments. Some might say, “These avant-garde musicians have driven the final nail into the coffin of academic music, so pop music has spread all over the world.” Others: “They breathed new life into music, making many sounds, connections between which have yet to be found.”¹¹ (Smirnitkiy, 2007). And this does not prevent Gubaidulina’s music to be performed very often all over the world. Nor does it prevent the audience from leaving these concerts just as often...

The composer Sofia Gubaidulina (b. 1931), one of the most controversial figures in Soviet music, spent her childhood and adolescence in Kazan, the capital of the Tatar Autonomous Republic, part of the Russian Federation. As the daughter of a surveyor engineer and a housewife mother, her childhood was a hungry one in pre-war Central Russia. The music school, the Kazan Conservatory, was her main joy, to be followed by the Moscow State Conservatory, where the future composer studied with a whole constellation of celebrities, including composers Y. Shaporin, N. Peiko, and pianist Y. Zak. In 1963, she completed her postgraduate studies in composition with V. Shebalin. Shostakovich, who was present at the performance of her *First Symphony*, wished her to go her own “wrong” way. Positioning herself as a Tatar-Russian composer (not so much because of the place of her birth, but rather the ethnic heritage of her parents: her father was Tatar, her mother Russian), Gubaidulina found herself in a much better position than, say, Schnittke, whose ethnicity through both parents was “problematic” in the Soviet Union at that time. Gubaidulina’s paternal grandfather was an *Imam* (a Muslim clergyman), whereas both her parents were atheists (like the vast majority of the Soviet people regardless of their heritage). The composer herself claims to be a profoundly spiritual person, who does not however follow strict religious guidelines in life or works. “I understand the word ‘religion’ in its direct meaning: as *re-ligio* (re-legato), that is, a restoration of *legato* between me (my soul) and God,” she says (Lukomsky, 1998, p. 33). Combinations of folk instruments (first of all, the *bayan*—a Russian accordion), the influence of electronic sounds, and finally, a passion for percussion—this is the most general palette of Gubaidulina’s soundscape. Through the special meaning she assigns to percussion, the composer observes “the unique feature of percussion instruments: they let one go inside the sound, discovering the mystery of sound” (Lukomsky, 1998, p. 33).

The composer has received many prestigious international awards, as well as honorary titles from leading universities in Europe and the United States. However, she never worked for a salary and never wrote music for the authorities of her native country. She was and remains an example of a freedom-loving artist who prefers a half-starved life to that of an artist living on commissions, especially those tendered by people in power. Nevertheless, having been commissioned by the International Bach Academy in Stuttgart to write *St. John Passion* on the occasion of the 250th anniversary of Bach’s death, the composer found it impossible to refuse such a flattering offer. What were the creative assets of Gubaidulina’s works on sacred, specifically Christian, themes? There were five such works, all written between 1978 and 1990: *De profundis* and *Et expecto* for bayan, *Seven Last Words* for cello, bayan, and strings, *Offertorium* for violin and orchestra, and *Hallelujah* for choir, orchestra, organ, counter-tenor, and color projectors.

St. John Passion (2000) and, later, *St. John Easter* (2002) create a complete cycle lasting together about three hours, being performed by some 200 singers and musicians. In advance of the premiere of the entire *St. John* cycle in Hamburg in March 2002, Gubaidulina provided the following commentary to *Sikorski Magazine* regarding this work:

¹¹ <https://www.mk.ru/editions/daily/article/2007/02/16/158327-svekolnyiy-blyuz.html>.

While working on the “Passion” I had to separate thoughts of the Resurrection from the actual “Passion.” However, I sensed that the narration of Jesus’s earthly life path must in no case be allowed to end with a “solution of the dramatic conflict;” after such a dramatic process, there could only be one thing—a sign from the Day of Judgement. This meant an extreme dissonance, a kind of cry or scream. And following this final scream, only one thing was possible—silence. There is no continuation and there can be no continuation: “It is finished.”¹² (Sikorski, 2002)

The style of this work can be defined as a unique combination of Russian Orthodox worship (the text is pronounced and sung in Russian) with German expressionism. One of the comments (2021) to the performance of this piece on *YouTube* states that “[t]he singers are singing as if they were present at the crucifixion of Jesus Christ.” Extremely tense from beginning to end, Gubaidulina’s *St. John Passion* is not easy to listen to—like all the composer’s other works.

Arvo Pärt: *My Heart’s in the Highlands*

The figure of Arvo Pärt (b. 1935) stands somewhat apart from other Soviet composers, the point not even being that he was born in Estonia during the period of the republic’s official independence from Soviet Russia, but that he never adhered to the doctrines and compositional practices adopted in the USSR. Not having had time to truly declare himself an avant-garde composer, he was immediately subjected to sharp criticism by the Union of Soviet Composers for using 12-tone technique in *Nekrolog (Obituary)* for the orchestra (1960), a technique clearly associated with Western “formalism” in the eyes of Soviet cultural authorities. Pärt then switched to new stylistic solutions, combining avant-garde techniques with Bach’s quotes, using a collage method. This period ended with the creation of *Credo* (1968), which caused a scandal in the Politburo of the Communist Party of Estonia, followed by the dismissal of several employees of the Estonian Philharmonic organization, who permitted the performance of this work without approval by the Union of Estonian Composers (Lubow, 2010). The composer retrospectively explains the concept behind the method used in *Credo* in the following way:

I wanted to put together the two worlds of love and hate. [...] I knew what kind of music I would write for hate, and I did it. But for love, I was not able to do it.’ That was what drew him to the idea of borrowing Bach’s theme and incorporating it into a collage.¹³ (Lubow, 2010)

After the premiere of *Credo*, all official commissions for compositions ceased, and Pärt did not write music for about eight years. During this period, he studied the musical heritage of the Catholic Church, mainly Gregorian chants, and also delved into religion, converting to Orthodoxy (the composer was born into a Lutheran family). Returning to composition, Pärt appeared in the completely different guise of a spiritual minimalist, whose style was woven from clearly audible harmonies, adorned with soft side-tones and relying on repetitive rhythm patterns. This is the style with which the music of Pärt, who meanwhile has become the most performed of the living (classical) composers,¹⁴ is associated. In 1980, the composer and his spouse Nora left Estonia and settled in Berlin. In 1992, after Estonia withdrew from the Soviet Union and became independent again, the Pärts returned home.

About three dozen of Pärt’s works, directly related to the Christian canonical-liturgical tradition, were written over four decades, from 1977 to the end of the 2010s. They can be attributed to various streams within

¹² https://www.sikorski.de/3028/en/sofia_gubaidulina_passion_and_resurrection_of_jesus_christ.html.

¹³ <https://archive.nytimes.com/www.nytimes.com/2010/10/17/magazine/17part-t.html>.

¹⁴ According to the website of the *Arvo Pärt Centre*, accessed October 9, 2021, <https://www.arvopart.ee/en/arvo-part-is-the-most-performed-living-composer-in-the-world-eighth-year-running/>, *Bachtrack*, the database of classical music events, confirms that, as of January 2019, Arvo Pärt is the world’s most performed contemporary composer for the eighth consecutive year.

the Christian tradition (they differ in language, the degree of “canonicity”, and performers makeup), but all these works, be it *De profundis* (1980), *Berliner Messe* (1990), *2 Slawische Psalmen* (1997), or *Littlemore Tractus* (2001), are united by Pärt’s unique and recognizable style, which the composer himself calls *tintinnabuli*, referring to small church bells with characteristic side-tones. The composer believes that

if the human has conflict in his soul and with everything, then [the] system of 12-tone music is exactly good for this. But if you have no more conflict with people, with the world, with God, then it is not necessary.¹⁵

My Heart’s in the Highlands for countertenor and organ (2000), to the words by Robert Burns (1759-96), was written for (and dedicated to) the countertenor David James on the occasion of his 50th birthday. Burns’s lyrics are conveyed in syllabic singing—each line of the text on a single note. The organ part gives each note of the vocal part a new harmonious color that hardly allows you to feel that the vocal part is actually a static monotonous recitation. Over the course of an eight-minute piece, the voice gradually rises and then falls between three steps of a minor triad. All the other 16 songs based on these verses, found by the author of this article on the YouTube, are stylized like a Scottish folk song. Only this one, written by a postmodern minimalist composer with experience in writing church music, sounds like a spirit soaring in the heights.

Conclusions

The findings of this study point to a positive answer to the first of the questions posed earlier in this review: sacred music was indeed being written by Soviet composers in the very last decade of the USSR. Not much, but enough to say yes. Since the assessment of the quality and characteristics of these works, as well as their belonging to a particular tradition, largely depends on the reference point chosen, we will endeavor to be as objective as possible.

Spiritual works of late Soviet composers belong to different forms of Christian music in both Western and Orthodox styles. Depending on the circumstances that prompted particular composers to write sacred works, their belonging to ethnic and cultural heritages, and the place in which they grew up—the results turned out to be completely different. Moreover, for some of these creative people, immersion in religion becomes a part of their life. In the course of the study, various, often opposing approaches of composers to sacred texts and their “embedding” in musical works were revealed. A variety of means of the musical language included modern compositional techniques, minimalism, the use of elements of the medieval style, and a fusion of all of the above. The study showed that the *hybridity of means* and the *blurring of canonical boundaries* are typical for the works under consideration.

A gap in the religious consciousness in the USSR for at least six decades (that is, two or three generations) could not help but led either to the creation of new values, or to the restoration of the original values of the national religion (that is, Orthodox Christianity), which had been abandoned for 60 years and then rethought, while the Church in the West has already gone through most of these stages and developed a new, period-appropriate way of looking at things. The disclosure of the layer of sacred music of late Soviet composers complements the picture of 20th-century church music, as well as the general picture of professional music written in genres related to church services or purely concert works on Christian themes.

¹⁵ Lubow, “The Sound.”

Although the main purpose of this article was to familiarize the academic audience with the subject of research, significant events in the biographies of composers, as well as related background information about the place and era in which they lived and worked, represent an additional, no less valuable topic. Returning to the broader meaning of this study, we can say that the very attempt to consider art associated with religion in a country that for decades rejected this worldview has additional value, and opens up new research perspectives in philosophy, sociology, cultural studies, and religious studies, not to mention musicology and art history. The survey of the genres and styles of religious music of late Soviet composers, placed in a socio-cultural rather than traditional environment, being the first review of its kind, is aimed at articulating a phenomenon that in itself deserves a more detailed study.

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